

# Prestige or Promotion: Industrial Reflexivity and Political Economy of *The Game Awards*

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Arts awards have become both a means of establishing cultural canon and an opportunity for increasing revenue of various cultural commodities. From *Academy Awards* and *Grammys* to the *Nobel Prize in Literature* and *Tonys*, winners as well as nominees have economically benefited from increased visibility, using cultural prestige to spark audience interest (Anand and Watson 2004; Boyle and Chiou 2009; Deuchert, Adjamah, and Pauly 2005; English 2005; Rossman and Schilke 2014). Unsurprisingly, the video game industry has adopted this tradition and established its own versions of prizes. *The Game Awards* (2014–current), organized and hosted by former Canadian video game journalist Geoff Keighley, are likely the most recognized ones, although there are other international prizes and competitions with longer histories, such as the *BAFTA Game Awards* (British Academy Games Awards; 2004–current) or *D.I.C.E. Awards* (1998–current), which are organized by the California-based Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences. Many indie game festivals (e.g., Independent Games Festival, IndieCade), trade fairs (Electronic Entertainment Expo, Gamescom), and game conventions also choose and celebrate showcased games, further adding to the number of game-related prizes and awards.

As mentioned, prizes have a documented economic impact on awarded and nominated cultural commodities (Anand and Watson 2004; Anand and Jones 2008; Boyle and Chiou 2009; Deuchert, Adjamah, and Pauly 2005; English 2005; Ponzo and Scoppa 2015; Rossman and Schilke 2014). Yet, there is little to no research on video game awards and their political-economic dimensions.<sup>1</sup> Occasionally, awards have been seen by scholars as markers of cultural relevance, serving as convenient samples for empirical game analysis (Juul 2019; Perreault et al. 2018). In this submission, I explore the roles and functions of video game awards, drawing on previous research on industrial reflexivity (Caldwell 2008; Švelch 2022; see also Klinger 2006) and cultural economics (e.g. Deuchert, Adjamah, and Pauly 2005; English 2005; Ponzo and Scoppa 2015). The concept of industrial reflexivity addresses how cultural industries represent themselves, their practitioners, and products, often in ways that embellish artistic achievement. Like behind-the-scenes footage and other promotional or self-reflexive materials, which are prime examples of industrial reflexivity, game awards and prizes contribute to a notion of cultural prestige by adopting cultural logics of established entertainment industries like film. The cultural economics perspective is useful for unpacking the economic dimensions of award shows, including their logistics and organization, or impact on sales. Other relevant aspects include, for example, composition of juries with regard to the professional status of jurors.

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For this submission, I focus specifically on *The Game Awards* as the video game award show with the highest viewership (Zheng 2022).<sup>2</sup> Using a mixed-methods approach, I explore both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the awards. The former, for example, includes distribution of nominated developers and publishers across the nine editions of the show. Here, preliminary findings show that the main Game of the Year category has been dominated by two publishers, namely Sony Interactive Entertainment and Nintendo, which have amassed 11 and 9 nominations, respectively. In the qualitative part of the analysis, which for the purpose of this submission is limited to a close reading of three editions of the show (the inaugural 2014, the virtual 2020, and the most recent 2022) and thematic analysis (Ayres 2008) of their coverage in the specialized press, I pay attention to the awarded categories, including their presentation and ordering during the show, invited presenters and performers, acceptance speeches, new game announcements, or commentary on video game industry working conditions.

Compared to other, non-video game award ceremonies, *The Game Awards* dedicate substantial airtime to upcoming games, thus having a strong promotional function, which likely helps to make the show financially viable by securing advertising money from publishers. In recent years, *The Game Awards* were also used as an opportunity for various sales promotions across digital distribution platforms like Epic Games Store or Steam, which then offered discounts on select nominated games. This dual nature of the show as both a celebration of the year's best games and a marketing event for upcoming titles is likely reflected in the fact that only 12 of the total 32 awards in 2022 were presented on stage. Other award ceremonies like the *Academy Awards* or *Tonys* have in the past years also resorted to a similar two-level approach, in which only some awards receive full media presentation and coverage, to keep the televised broadcasts shorter and presumably more entertaining (e.g. Davis 2022). On a related note, *The Game Awards*, which are modelled after award ceremonies like the *Academy Awards*, lean into associations with film and television by featuring actors as presenters for various awards.

To summarize, this submission seeks to analyze *The Game Awards* as a form of industrial reflexivity. Given its high viewership and strong ties to major video game publishers, the award show is an important event in video game culture. While I unfortunately do not have access to sales data to measure any direct impact from the cultural economics perspective, it is still possible to explore the political economic dimensions of *The Game Awards* through other, albeit less direct means, such as advertising or sales promotions. While lacking in cultural relevance and mainstream recognition compared to established arts awards even according to its creator Geoff Keighley (Summers, Acovino, and Yu 2022), *The Game Awards* present an arguably unique take on the format with a strong emphasis on commodification and spectator entertainment.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the context of analog games, the German *Spiel des Jahres* prize (1999–current) has been noted for its significant impact on boosting the sales of awarded games (Woods 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Reportedly, the 2022 edition of *The Game Awards* had 103 million total viewers, continuing in a steady growth in viewership across years (Zheng 2022).